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SUBJECT: EMBASSY MINSK WEEKLY REPORT - December 28, 2005

¶1. The following are brief items of interest compiled by Embassy Minsk.

Human Rights

No Protection from Triple Jeopardy in Belarus

¶2. On December 20, the Supreme Economic Court (SEC) overturned its own previous ruling and decided that the Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC) must pay approximately USD 72,000 in fines and back taxes that it owes on an EU grant that it received. The BHC chairwoman and chief accountant face possible criminal charges for tax evasion and the BHC fears liquidation. In the past, courts have twice ruled that the grant was not taxable under a May 1994 memorandum between the Belarusian government and the EU, but SEC deputy chairman Yevgeny Smirnov challenged the SEC's own ruling that BHC was not liable for the taxes, which led to the reopening of the case.

State Universities Limit Students' Internet Access

¶3. On December 22, human rights website "Charter 97" published the text of two emails that they had received from students at the Belarusian State University (BSU) and the Belarusian State Economic University (BSEU). The emails claimed that that university authorities are limiting students' access to internet sites both at the university and in dormitories. Attempts to visit opposition sites and post comments are investigated and guilty students are expelled. [Note: The BSEU is the university where rector Vladimir Shimov recently expelled a top student for traveling to France for three days without permission to participate in a European student conference.]

Belarus Kicks Out Two Catholic Priests

¶4. On December 22, the GOB refused to renew the visas for two Catholic priests from Poland. The priests must leave the country by December 31. Father Robert Krzywicki, who worked in Borisov for more than 10 years, speculated that the authorities expelled him due to his work with youth.

Independent Media Takes Another Hit

¶5. On December 23, the independent weekly Salidarnasts was forced to suspend publication due to lack of income when the state distribution monopoly refused to sell the newspaper at kiosks and the state postal monopoly refused to include the newspaper in its distribution catalogue. Earlier, on December 16, Minsk Economic Court Judge Yelena Melnikova refused to hear independent newspaper Narodnaya Volya's case against the state monopoly postal service Belpochta, which refused to distribute the paper, claiming the lawsuit was outside the court's jurisdiction.

Authorities Intimidate Participants in Day of Solidarity

¶16. Press reports indicated that on December 16 authorities took steps to intimidate the participants in the "Day of Solidarity," commemorating those who persecuted by the GOB. Independent media source BelaPAN reports that police officers counted the number of windows with candles in them and recorded the names and addresses of the Russian journalists who came to cover the event. BelaPAN also reported that student dormitory wardens required students to be in their rooms with their lights on during the event.

Opposition Activist Can't Print News Bulletin

¶17. Press reported that on December 16, police charged opposition youth activist Pavel Krasovsky with an administrative offense for defaming public officials after he refused to stop printing his local news bulletin, "Nablyudatel," that contained caricatures of local government officials. Krasovsky disputed the charge stating that the caricatures were intended to be humorous.

Political Prisoner's Son Detained, Charged

¶18. On December 23, police in Grodno detained Vladimir Levonevsky for distributing a news bulletin in the city's central market. Police confiscated 250 copies of the bulletin, held Vladimir for two hours, and charged him with distributing printed material that lacked editorial information. This charge carries with it a possible fine of USD 70. Vladimir insisted his bulletin had the required information, contained only New Year's greetings and information on government business regulations, and violated no laws. Vladimir is the son of Valery Levonevsky, in jail for two years for writing a poem deemed insulting to Lukashenko.

Residents Protest Paper Ban

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¶19. On December 22, Vitebskoblsoyuzpechat, the state body that controls the state monopoly newspaper kiosk system in Vitebsk oblast, told independent Vitebsk newspaper Vitebskiy Kurier it could no longer be sold in kiosks. More than 1,600 local residents immediately signed a letter of protest to regional officials.

Zubr Youths Arrested

¶10. On December 27, police detained two members of the Zubr youth group, Aleksandr Kazakov and Dmitry Zubro, for spray painting the number 16 inside a circle -- a Zubr/Charter 97 campaign to get Belarusians to remember the victims of the regime on the 16th of each month. The youth have remained in detention since their arrest, and on December 30 authorities charged them with the criminal act of disobeying a police officer.

----- Economics -----

Another Company Golden Shared

¶11. On December 20, the Council of Ministers invoked the Golden Share law to take control of Minsk textile factory Kamvol for one year. In 2004 Kamvol was added to a list of Belarusian strategic enterprises, which needed to improve their financial standing. Despite (or perhaps because of) increasing production by 33 percent in 2005, the state decided to take over the company. Immediately after taking control of the company, the GOB's State Light Industry Concern (Bellegprom) suggested lending Kamvol money in exchange for the state receiving 99 percent ownership of the plant. Kamvol has 1,800 employees and is one of the CIS' largest manufacturers of worsted wool.

De-Privatization to Become Total?

¶12. The Interfax news service reported a government official told them about a bill currently being drafted that would allow

the GOB to de-privatize any property that was being mismanaged. The source claimed the GOB was actively restoring state ownership of many firms in exchange for paying off their debts to the state budget, such as through the Golden Share, but that this approach was taking too long. The new bill would make this process "less lengthy and more transparent."

Potatoes to Rescue Motorcycle Company

¶13. Workers at the motorcycle factory Motovelo held a brief strike on November 25 to protest their not receiving wages for two months. Deputy Prime Minister Vladimir Semashko told a press conference on December 16 that 95 percent of Motovelo's equipment was worn out, and that the company would lose BYR 9 billion [USD 4.2 million] in 2005. To solve this problem, Semashko recommended Motovelo build 20 potato harvesters before the 2006 sowing season begins. The same day, President Lukashenko publicly scolded Motovelo's workers for going on strike, lauded the potato harvester idea, but announced the plant should continue to build motorcycles. On December 20, the GOB announced it would erase Motovelo's debts in exchange for 90 percent of the company (see the two items above). All the company's shares currently belong to employees.

Belarus to Buy Ukrainian Energy

¶14. On December 16, the GOB signed a contract to buy 2.5 billion kWh from Ukraine in 2006, for USD 0.022 per kWh. The contract, worth USD 52 million, would import electricity from Chernobyl to Mozyr, and from Chernihiv to Gomel.

Less Bankrupt Farms

¶15. Deputy Agriculture Minister Nadezhda Kotkovets announced the number of bankrupt state farms fell from 1,203 to 50 in ¶2005. She claimed that 771 farms became profitable through their own efforts, while another 425 became profitable after they were merged with actually profitable farms. [Comment: Post doubts that 771 state farms became profitable this year through their own efforts.]

Trade with Moscow Plummets

¶16. On December 20, Prime Minister Sergey Sidorsky and Moscow Mayor Yury Luzhkov announced Belarus' trade with Moscow fell by 45.5 percent in the first ten months of the year, to USD 2.5 billion. Belarus' exports fell 8.6 percent to USD 1.6 billion, while its imports from Moscow fell 65.4 percent to USD 907.6 million. Both blamed the fall on the January switch of VAT to the country-of-destination principle.

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Tax Arrears Climb

¶17. The Ministry of Taxes announced that tax arrears in Belarus climbed 37.6 percent in the first eleven months of the year to BYR 323.7 billion (USD 150.5 million).

Civil Society

Immigration to Israel From CIS Down, Except for Belarus

¶18. On December 28, the Jewish Agency for Israel announced that 9,124 immigrants moved to Israel from the former Soviet Union (FSU) in 2005, which is a 10 percent decrease from last year. The number of immigrants from Belarus to Israel, however, increased by 26 percent.

Belarus al-Qaeda Arrested in Spain

¶19. Spanish police announced they arrested a Belarusian chemical weapons expert who was a member of al-Qaeda. Thirty-

year-old Minsk resident Andrey Misyura, aka Sergey Malyshev, aka Amin al-Ansari reportedly recruited suicide bombers in Spain, and had fought in Chechnya, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

"Merry Christmas, It's the Fuzz!!"

¶20. Minsk Police conducted an operation called, "Who's There? It's the Police Santa Claus!" from December 19 to 23. Dressing as Santa Claus, police officers went around Minsk trying to convince homeowners to open their doors to a stranger. Those who refused to open their door received a prize for having the correct level of security awareness.

International Relations

EU Missions in Minsk Outraged By Misinformation on State TV

¶21. On December 19 and 23, the German, French and Czech Embassies issued statements condemning state television allegations that visa applicants are encouraged to engage in opposition activities. On December 16 and 18, the Belarusian State TV program "In Focus" showed a story entitled "Visa Blackmail" where two unidentified men claim that embassy officials told them that they must engage in opposition activity if they wish to receive visas. The EU missions deny such accusations and reminded the GOB that such lies strain EU-Belarusian relations.

Science

Belarus to Explore Antarctica

¶22. In Belarus' ongoing quest to gain all the trappings of a world power, on December 19 National Academy of Sciences President Mikhail Myasnikovich announced the GOB would open a research station in Antarctica. Myasnikovich explained, "Opening a research station in Antarctica is, on the one hand, political prestige, and on the other hand a scientific achievement." In another purely prestigious move, Belarus hopes to launch its first satellite in 2006, on a Russian booster.

Quotes of the Week

¶23. After naming new Belarusian KGB officials On December 22, Lukashenko offered advice to the new appointees:

The appointees should "support the freedom-loving independent nation [of Belarus] that never takes orders from anybody or stands in somebody's way.... This nation will never let anyone interfere in its business. This is our simple formula."

¶24. On December 26 in an interview with "Rossiiskaya Gazeta," Lukashenko commented on the impossibility of revolution ever occurring the US:

"God forbid such a thing [revolution] should happen in the United States; there would be tanks firing at the opposition."

¶25. Comparing NATO to Hitler's Germany, state television

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propagandist Yevgeniy Novikov announced on state TV December 23,

"NATO forces are just a few kilometers away from the Belarusian city of Brest! In this situation it is extremely important that Russian and Belarus maintain loyalty to each other, no matter what it takes."

